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Using Think-Alouds to Improve Reading Comprehension

By: Roger Farr, Jenny Conner

Students need to think while they are reading. By using modeling, coached practice, and reflection, you can teach your students strategies to help them think while they read and build their comprehension.

Good readers:

- Draw on background knowledge as they read
- Make predictions as they read
- Visualize the events of a text as they read
- Recognize confusion as they read
- Recognize a text's structure/organization as they read
- Identify/recognize a purpose for reading
- Monitor their strategy use according to the purpose for reading the text

In other words, students need to think while they are reading. By using modeling, coached practice, and reflection, you can teach your students strategies to help them think while they read and build their comprehension.

What you will need:

- Five different texts
- Three colored objects (i.e. hats, balls, or sticks)

Modeling

What it is

By modeling for students the types of behaviors good readers are engaged in as they read, we are providing them with the opportunity to become aware of the

many strategies and monitoring behaviors that good readers use.

When good readers are reading relatively simple texts (according to their own reading abilities) these strategic behaviors are fairly automatic. Typically, good readers only become aware of their strategy use when they recognize that they are failing to comprehend. They then are cognizant of the need to reevaluate their strategy use in order to remedy their failure to comprehend. Furthermore, good readers are more likely to fall back on appropriate strategies when the need to change strategies becomes apparent. For most poor readers however, using a variety of strategies, using strategies appropriately, and monitoring strategies is not automatic. Therefore modeling strategic behaviors for struggling readers by thinking aloud for them while we read (and hence, allowing students to think along), is the first step in raising their awareness of what it means to be a strategic reader.

An activity

Model thinking aloud for your students with one of the texts. (Students should have a copy of this text in front of them) Have students keep a list of the different types of things you (the reader) are doing to help you better understand the text. When you're done, start a master list on a large piece of paper, writing down strategies students share with you – using their own words.

Coached practice

What it is

By engaging poor readers in coached practice in the think-aloud method, we are providing them with the opportunity and guidance they need to choose useful, appropriate strategies to enhance reading comprehension. We are encouraging them to think about why and when to use certain strategies, and providing them with the tools they need to successfully monitor their own comprehension. With enough modeling and coached practice, students will be on their way to becoming independent users of strategies. Eventually they will become their own coaches. Ultimately, using the strategies will become more automatic for them, so that activities they have practiced will be happening automatically in their heads.

An activity

With a different text from the one you initially modeled, tell students you will be stopping occasionally as you read to ask them what they are thinking about. Tell them you will call on one of them and ask them, "What are you thinking about now?" (They should not have a copy of the text in front of them.) If, when a student shares his thoughts, the connection to the text is not clear, encourage the student to explain himself. (If students are having trouble with this task, focus in on one single strategy – for example, prediction.) Once you've finished reading the text, go back to your master list of strategies, discuss which ones the students used, and add to the list if new strategies come up. Repeat this activity another day, using a

new text. If students have trouble, you may need to stop and model thinking aloud again for students.

Next, insert write-in boxes into a new text. Explain to students that they will be doing exactly what they had been doing out loud, but this time they will be writing their thoughts in the boxes. When students are finished with the task, read the text, stopping to ask students to read what they have written in the boxes and to explain what made them think of what they wrote. Go back to your master strategy list and have the students talk about the strategies they used. Add to the list if possible.

What strategies are you discovering students are not using, even when the text and the purpose for reading would seem to encourage those strategies? Focus in on 2 or 3 of those strategies. Find a text which lends itself to those 2 or 3 strategies. Assign a strategy to each of the different colored objects. Explain to students that, when they are presented with a colored object they are to use the strategy assigned to it. Read a text to them and stop at certain predetermined stop points. Hand a student one of the objects and encourage him to use the strategy associated with that color.

Reflection

What it is

By getting students to reflect on the process of thinking aloud as they read, we're encouraging them to recognize the difference between reading the words and comprehending the text. By talking about their own strategy use students gain insights into the complexities of reading, and hence expand their understanding of what it means to be a "good reader."

An activity

Have students reflect on the process of thinking aloud. Have them write a letter to you or to another classmate in which they reflect on how they feel thinking aloud benefits them as readers. What have they learned about reading? What are they doing now that they didn't used to do?

Summary

These are a few of the necessary components to using the think-aloud method successfully. However the most important component that will determine the success of the think-aloud method in your classroom is you. There is no magic formula or set of steps which will make this method (or any other) successful. Success lies in how you use it – which means choosing appropriate texts, listening carefully to students, determining students' abilities, and adapting the method to your own students' needs and abilities. In order to do this successfully, we feel that it is important to understand why the method works. In other words, you need to have a basic understanding of what you're trying to accomplish by using this

method.

This article is based on "Using Think-Alouds to Build Reading Comprehension" by Roger Farr and Jenny Conner.

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Comments

This article brings to the surface the need for modeling strategies to help struggling readers comprehend what they read.

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on January 17, 2010 - 9:53pm
(<http://www.readingrockets.org/comment/253#comment-253>)

[reply](http://www.readingrockets.org/comment/reply/121534/253) (<http://www.readingrockets.org/comment/reply/121534/253>)

I love think-alouds. They are truly cross-curricular, high-level, and promote the idea that "reading is thinking".

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on February 26, 2010 - 9:47am
(<http://www.readingrockets.org/comment/254#comment-254>)

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